The Few Who Dared:

Creative Resistance by the “Righteous Among the Nations”

“And whoever saves a single life, the Bible considers it as if he saved an entire world.”

– Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5, The Babylonian Talmud

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Creative Resistance During the Holocaust – ENGLISH 140A

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The honor of “Righteous Among the Nations” is unique in Jewish history. Awarded by the Jewish people through the State of Israel, this honor pays tribute to the non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. Yad Vashem, the organization responsible for bestowing this honor, recognizes the “Righteous” based on the following four criteria: 1) the rescuer was actively involved in an attempt to save a Jew, regardless of the outcome of such an attempt; 2) the rescuer knew that in extending such aid he was risking his life, safety, and personal freedom, since the Nazis considered assisting Jews a capital offense; 3) the primary motives for rescue were humanitarian, meaning that the rescuer must not have received material compensation as a condition of his actions; and 4) such rescue or aid can be confirmed by the rescued persons, or substantiated by first-hand eyewitness reports and, where possible, by genuine archival documentation. By declaring these rescuers the “Righteous Among the Nations,” Yad Vashem commemorates the brave few who fought against the aims of the Nazi regime, which with its collaborators murdered six million European Jews.

Nevertheless, this tribute covers a vast range of peoples and resistance activities, ranging from individual rescuers to the entire nation of Denmark. Beyond the act of saving Jews, the Righteous might appear an arbitrary group, recognized more for their isolated acts of heroism than their common values, goals, and achievements. How can one reconcile the vast disparities between these heroes, adopting from their examples a set of traits that convey what it means to rescue a disappearing people? The best method is to compare their stories and, specifically, examine the evidence they have left behind. In that light, a pastoral letter from Archbishop Saliège of Toulouse, a painting of Czech educator Premysl Pitter, and a final letter by German soldier Anton Schmid demonstrate
the characteristics and deeds that bind the Righteous Among the Nations together. Saliège, Pitter, and Schmid recognized the crimes perpetrated against the Jewish people when the rest of the world chose to ignore them. At great personal risk, these rescuers creatively used their skills and positions to do whatever they could to advance the cause of resistance and affirm the goodness of humankind. They had few practical or selfish reasons to resist, but instead acted on principle against Nazi tyranny. In doing so, Saliège, Pitter, and Schmid defined what it means to be one of the Righteous.

Diverse Ways of Acknowledging the Unimaginable

The above artifacts from the Holocaust—two letters and a painting—are as different as the people they involve. To begin with, the letter from Jules-Géraud Saliège (1870–1956), Archbishop of Toulouse, was a public address to congregants read by all of the priests in the archdiocese on August 23, 1942 (See Appendix A). Saliège’s letter was a deliberate effort to counter the policies of the Vichy authorities towards Jews, and it was part of his outspoken attacks on Germany’s treatment of the Jews and the conscription of Frenchmen. The painting depicting Premysl Pitter (1895-1976), entitled “Dreams” (1945), had much more personal connotations (See Appendix B). Its artist was Yehuda Bacon (1929-present), a Jewish Czech-Israeli painter who survived Terezín and several other Nazi concentration camps before liberation by U.S. troops in May 1945.1 Pitter had created a children’s center in Prague in 1933 that subsequently became a refuge for Jewish children, and right after the war ended, he was in charge of helping to resettle

1 Bacon was deported with his family to Terezín (Theresienstadt) in the fall of 1942. He subsequently endured Auschwitz-Birkenau, a Death March to Mauthausen, and two of the sub-camps in Mauthausen before his liberation. The rest of his family did not survive.
children returning from the camps, one of whom was Bacon. “Dreams,” painted in 1945, recognizes Pitter as the figure who understood Bacon’s past sufferings and led him towards a brighter future. Meanwhile, Anton Schmid (1900-1942), an Austrian Wehrmacht sergeant, wrote a final letter to his wife right before his execution (See Appendix C). A Nazi war court sentenced Schmid to death for saving Jews during his deployment to Vilnius, Lithuania. His letter was very private, and though it had the personal nature of “Dreams,” it was almost apolitical, focusing on the reasons for his actions and making no mention of Germany or the Nazis.

Although these primary sources occur in vastly different contexts, each clearly demonstrates that their subject recognizes the atrocities committed against the Jews. First, Schmid emphasizes in his letter that his only act was “to save human lives,” indicating that the Jews he saved would have otherwise died were it not for his aid (par. 3). Archbishop Saliège is even more frank in his pastoral letter, directly relating what is happening in France to all of his congregants: “Children, women, men, fathers and mothers treated like a lowly herd; members of a single family separated from each other and carted away to an unknown destination—it is our age which was destined to see this dreadful sight” (par. 3). Saliège highlights the manner in which the Jews were being treated like animals, demonstrating in no uncertain terms the deprivation of humanity that they were experiencing on French soil. Bacon’s painting is perhaps the most explicit display of non-Jewish awareness. In “Dreams,” Pitter’s arm is outstretched, his body leans forward, and his visage faces fully towards a new beginning. He urgently pulls Bacon away from the hellish land of camps and gas chambers, leading the painter in the direction of a palm tree that has implications of paradise.
Why is recognition of Jewish suffering by non-Jews so important? Recognition is the crux of establishing empathy, and in turn fomenting resistance. As Elie Wiesel once wrote, “What hurts the victim most is not the cruelty of the oppressor but the silence of the bystander” (qtd. in Rittner and Myers x). Nazi Europe was replete with bystanders. Onetime neighbors and friends of Jews across the continent retreated behind the veil of indifference to avoid persecution by their Nazi overlords.2 This “bystander effect” was among the most damning consequences of Nazism for the Jews, for it achieved the rejection of Jews from society that the Nazi regime sought. Once the Jews had been rejected, it was that much easier to eliminate them. To pay attention to Nazi crimes and brutality against the Jews was a conscious choice, a moral choice, and Schmid, Saliège, and Pitter each made that choice knowingly. Their awareness, if spread to others, was in itself an act of creative resistance. Ideas are one of the most powerful tools against despotism, and once they take root, they are very difficult to stamp out. However, the awareness that these non-Jews espoused also incited them to take further action as rescuers and symbols of resistance.

Saving Jewish Lives

The letters of Schmid and Saliège and Bacon’s painting of Pitter together demonstrate that the Righteous Among the Nations used whatever leverage and influence their positions granted them to help save Jewish lives. Their efforts necessarily involved acts of creative resistance, due to the circumstances under which each of these non-

2 The second leaflet of the White Rose resistance group draws attention to the proliferation of bystanders in Germany, where Nazism was most palpable: “Why are the German people so apathetic in the face of all these abominable crimes, crimes so unworthy of the human race?” (qtd. in Dumbach and Newborn 191).
Jewish rescuers was working. For example, Anton Schmid was under close watch as a soldier in the Wermacht, and he knew eventually that his resistance work would catch up with him: “I could not change anything, otherwise I would have spared you and Greta all this…. I did not wish to cause you this pain, but unfortunately there is no way back” (par. 3). His fatalistic approach to assisting Jews seems extreme, given that he certainly could have stopped helping them when his situation became too precarious. However, as knowledge of his help to the Jews became more widespread, Schmid increased his involvement, developing a special relationship with Mordechai Tenenbaum and the Jewish underground. That relationship, in particular, required the utmost secrecy, and even with the most creative evasive techniques, it took less than a year for the Nazis to catch him and charge him with high treason. Still, Schmid’s insistence that “there is no way back” illustrates that his rescue efforts were the commitment of a lifetime, and that he felt compelled to seek every channel possible to help save hundreds of Jews, as he ultimately did.

Saliège’s pastoral exhibits this same “all-or-nothing” tendency. He had his letter promulgated through the most public means possible, the pulpit of every church in the Toulouse archdiocese, and then used it to pave the way for practical action. Specifically, he showed rhetorical creativity in asking his congregants, “Why are we the defeated?” (par. 5). His letter frames the situation in France as a state of war, and the Nazis as France’s victorious enemies, a purposeful slap in the face to the Vichy regime. As the

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3 Initially, he employed Jews as workers for his military unit, provided some Jews with ID papers, got others released from the infamous Lukiski prison, used army trucks under his control to transfer Jews to less dangerous places, and went as far as to shelter Jews in his apartment and office. In order to carry out such activities, he had to be inventive and play two roles at once, those of oppressor and rescuer.
French Resistance circulated hundreds of thousands of copies of his pastoral, causing support of the Vichy regime to plummet, Saliège instructed the clergymen and nuns in his archdiocese to hide Jews, particularly children (“Monsignor Jules-Gérard Saliège” par. 3). Thus, through this one letter, he imaginatively frustrated the anti-Semitic policies of both the French gendarmerie and the occupation authorities.

Similarly, Bacon’s painting of Pitter suggests the extent of the educator’s involvement in aiding Jews through a technique called symbolic expressionism, in which the painter radically distorts reality to achieve a particular emotive effect through the use of symbolic images. In “Dreams,” Pitter is a large, warm figure. His orange coloring matches the tones of the brighter place to which he is guiding Bacon, and his size and focal placement in a beaming ray of light overshadows the electric barbed wire fences and smoking death camp in the background. These innovative artistic features make Pitter a larger-than-life figure, whose impact and determination are so profound that it can block out the horrors that a child like Bacon has witnessed. In addition, the painting itself is a creative act of resistance, for Bacon created “Dreams” using skills he had learned from artists in Terezín, much like the young pupils of Friedl Dicker Brandeis. Instead of wiping out Jewish art through segregation, therefore, the Nazis’ imprisonment of Bacon in Terezín enabled such art to flourish; their cruelty gave Bacon the ability to celebrate the idealism and kindness of his savior over the barbarity of Nazi hatred. As Bacon’s portrayal implies, Pitter devoted his life to protecting and caring for children, much like Janusz Korczak did at his orphanage in the Warsaw Ghetto. Even after the Gestapo took him to their headquarters for interrogations, Pitter refused to change course, a resolve that Bacon’s watercolor effectively conveys.
A Matter of Principle

During the Holocaust, Gentiles did not normally have material reasons to help Jews. One Jewish life had little physical, economic value to non-Jews, and as Jews were increasingly separated from mainstream society by forced resettlements and racially charged Nazi propaganda, a Jewish life typically lost its emotional value as well. Even if Gentiles had use for cheap Jewish labor, for instance, such laborers could be easily replaced with “newer” Jewish prisoners if the former ones declined in productivity. Thus, rescuers like Schmid, Saliège, and Pitter had to act from something deeper than selfish interest to put so much time, energy, and thought into saving Jews. For them, saving Jews was a question of upholding their ideals. In the spirit of Anne Frank, they sought to stay true to their consciences. The three pieces of evidence discussed in this paper—Saliège’s pastoral, Schmid’s letter, and Bacon’s depiction of Pitter—demonstrate that by acting out of similar moral principles, compassion, and faith, these rescuers embodied a creative form of spiritual resistance that would endure long beyond the Nazi regime.

Moral values feature prominently in each of these sources, especially regarding the treatment of Jews as human beings. For example, Archbishop Saliège points out the immorality of the dehumanization of Jews in France by contrasting their circumstances with appeals to human and Christian morality, noting that mortals cannot do away with the rights and duties that come from the nature of man and God. He continues that the Jews, instead, are their equals:

The Jews are men; the Jewesses are women. The foreigners are men and women. One may not do anything one wishes to these men, to these women, to these fathers and mothers. They are part of the human race;
they are our brothers, like so many others. A Christian cannot forget this (par. 8).

Saliège has erased the barriers that the Nazis and their collaborators seek to create between Jews and other races. His eloquent defense of Jewish humanity identifies in no uncertain terms the immorality of the round-ups and deportations, and demonstrates that he is willing to stand up for his values. Saliège’s example of spiritual resistance parallels that of Pitter, who transformed Bacon and hundreds of other children with his appreciation for each precious human life. As Bacon shows in “Dreams,” Pitter’s active appreciation functioned as a bridge between the evils of the past and a new, better world.

Anton Schmid’s final letter reflects the same belief in Jewish equality, adding a degree of compassion that his fellow rescuers also shared. In the midst of his condolences to his loved ones, Schimd provides the fundamental reasons for his salvation of Jews: “…All I did was to save human lives, even if they were Jews, and in doing so, I sealed my own fate. As I have always done, I acted only for the sake of others, and so I sacrificed everything for my fellow men” (par. 3). Schmid had no doubt about the righteousness of his actions. Despite all of the Nazis’ attempts to dehumanize the Jews, he, a German army officer, viewed them as equal people who ought to be saved from murder and annihilation. The Nazis could not break Schmid’s respect and appreciation for his fellow man, and his selfless willingness to sacrifice everything for his ideals and for others. Furthermore, Schmid’s letter is a moving articulation of everything Nazism lacked, especially compassion, tolerance, and understanding. By espousing these values and doing what he could to implement them, he resisted the temptation to abide by his government’s agenda of hate and died with his spirit intact.
A final common value that these three sources share is faith, whether it is religious or humanist. As a Catholic Archbishop, Saliège naturally emphasizes the roles that Christian morality and respect for God ought to play in the comportment of his fellow Frenchmen. However, he also very much believes in the nature of mankind, specifically “the tradition of respect for human dignity;” he even utilizes that notion to conclude his pastoral (par. 9). In doing so, he makes the Holocaust a human tragedy, as opposed to a divine scourge upon mankind, and implies that humans are responsible for ending its madness. On the other hand, while Anton Schmid writes poignantly about his “fellow men,” religious faith figures heavily in his resolve. He believes that his fate must be the will of God, whom he urges his beloved Steffi to trust, and he consequently is ready to go into His arms.

Nevertheless, Yehuda Bacon offers possibly the most poignant comment on faith. In the inscription at the bottom of “Dreams,” he writes in Czech, “To the man who restored my belief in humanity” (See Appendix B). This dedication, of course, is to Premysl Pitter, whose love for the young Holocaust survivors, who had learned in the camps not to trust anything, gradually enabled them to believe again in human beings. This triumph by Pitter is a testament to the inability of Nazism to wipe out Jewish humanity. Bacon had been processed through three of the worst camps in Europe, lost his family, and been deprived of every resource necessary to life, except perhaps the will to live. As in Maus: And Here My Troubles Began, the chimney looms in “Dreams” over Bacon’s story of survival, belching smoke into a blood-red sky. Yet he was still not defeated. Premysl Pitter showed Bacon a way forward from the murder and isolation, demonstrating his faith that Bacon could heal and trust humanity once more. Then, like
fellow painter Charlotte Salomon, Bacon “from the depths could create [his] world anew” (Felstiner 236). As he ascends in “Dreams” from hell to a future of promise, the new world beckons.

The Path of the Righteous

Père Marie-Benoît, a Capuchin Franciscan friar who smuggled thousands of Jews to safety from southern France, once wrote, “History is not the simple and cold recital of what happened but a lesson in living, eminently useful to those who take it to heart.” The Righteous Among the Nations, a group that includes Marie-Benoît, have demonstrated that their “lessons in living” transcend occupations and nationalities. Brought together by a single, horrific event, these dedicated few non-Jews dared to fight back against the course of the Holocaust. They creatively employed every means in their power to save Jews and resist Nazi aims, and they did so with no incentive other than the impetus of conscience. The legacies of their principles have continued to spread, both through their stories and through the descendants of the people they saved. As these rescuers pass into eternity, they remind us of the power of ideals to stand up to tyranny when the life of another is threatened, no matter how dire the circumstances. In the path of the Righteous, there is no Final Solution to human hope.
Appendix A

PASTORAL LETTER FROM HIS EXCELLENCY MONSIGNOR SALIÈGE,
ARCHBISHOP OF TOULOUSE

On “human dignity,” read out from the pulpit on August 23, 1942, without comment.

My very dear Brothers,

There is a Christian morality, a human morality, which lays down duties and recognizes rights. These rights and duties stem from the nature of man; they come from God. One can violate them.... No mortal has the power to do away with them.

Children, women, men, fathers and mothers treated like a lowly herd; members of a single family separated from each other and carted away to an unknown destination—it is our age which was destined to see this dreadful sight.

Why is there no longer any right of asylum in our churches?

Why are we the defeated?

Lord, have pity on us.

Our Lady, pray for France.

In our diocese, moving scenes have occurred in the camps of Noé and Récébédou. The Jews are men; the Jewesses are women. The foreigners are men and women. One may not do anything one wishes to these men, to these women, to these fathers and mothers. They are part of the human race; they are our brothers, like so many others. A Christian cannot forget this.

France, beloved Fatherland; France, which bears in the consciences of all your children the tradition of respect for human dignity; chivalrous and generous France—I have no doubt that you are not responsible for these errors.

Yours devotedly, dear Brothers,

(Signed) Jules-Géraud Saliège
Archbishop of Toulouse

Source: Jules-Géraud Saliège, “Human Dignity,” Jewish Virtual Library,
Appendix B

“Dreams” (1945)

ANTON SCHMID’S LETTER

My dear Steffi,

As I think of you in joy and in sorrow, I inform you, my dearest, that my verdict has been announced today and that I must part from this world, for I have been sentenced to death. Please put your trust in God, who decides all our destinies.

I could not change anything, otherwise I would have spared you and Greta all this. Please forgive me. I did not wish to cause you this pain, but unfortunately there is no way back. I am prepared to die since this is the will of God and His will must be done. You must reconcile yourself to this. And once again, I ask you two, the dearest to me in all the world, please forget the pain I’m causing you, and keep your peace. After all, all I did was to save human lives, even if they were Jews, and in doing so, I sealed my own fate. As I have always done, I acted only for the sake of others, and so I sacrificed everything for my fellow men.

My dear ones, I beg you again and again, please forget me. Everything is ordained; it is what fate willed. I conclude these lines and send my blessing and kisses to both of you and to all those close to me in this world and the next, where God will speedily take me into His arms.

Loving you for eternity,
Toni

Works Cited


